SPECIAL TOPIC: GNOSTICISM (from Greek word *gnosis*, which means "knowledge," cf. I Tim. 6:20)

I. The setting of the first century

The Roman world of the first century was a time of eclecticism between the Eastern and Western religions.

A. The gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons were in ill repute.

B. The Mystery religions were very popular because of their emphasis on

1. personal relationship with the deity
2. secret knowledge

C. Secular Greek philosophy was popular and was merging with other worldviews.

Into this world of eclectic religion came the exclusiveness of the Christian faith (Jesus is the only way to God, cf. John 3:36; 14:6; 1 John 5:12). Whatever the exact background of the heresy, it was an attempt to make the exclusivism of Christianity plausible and intellectually acceptable to a wider Greek-Roman audience. It is possible that Gnostic thought influenced fringe Jewish sects (i.e., one example: DSS Essene Community). This may explain some of the Jewish elements of NT books related to Gnosticism.

II. Some of the basic tenets of the heresy by references from 1 John.

A. a denial of the incarnation of Jesus Christ

B. a denial of the centrality of Jesus Christ in salvation

C. a lack of an appropriate Christian lifestyle

D. an emphasis on knowledge (often secret)

E. a tendency toward exclusivism and elitism

III. Incipient Gnosticism of the first century

A. The basic teachings of Incipient Gnosticism of the first century seem to have been an emphasis on the ontological (eternal) dualism between spirit and matter. Spirit (high god) was considered good, while matter was inherently evil. This dichotomy resembles

1. Platonism's ideal versus physical
2. heavenly versus earthly dualism
3. invisible versus visible There was also an overemphasis on the importance of secret knowledge (passwords or secret codes which allow a soul to pass through the angelic spheres [*aeons*] up to the high god) necessary for salvation.
4. possibly an influence from Zoroastrianism (also a dualism)

B. There are two forms of Incipient Gnosticism which apparently could be in the background of 1 John

1. Docetic Gnosticism, which denies the true humanity of Jesus because matter is evil
2. Cerinthian Gnosticism, which identifies the Christ with one of many *aeons* or angelic levels between the good high god and evil matter. This "Christ Spirit" indwelt the man Jesus at his baptism and left him before his crucifixion.
3. of these two groups some practiced asceticism (if the body wants it, it is evil), the other antinomianism (if the body wants it, do it)

C. There is no written evidence of a developed system of Gnosticism in the first century. It is not until the middle of the second century that documented evidence existed (see Nag Hammadi Texts). For further information about "Gnosticism" see

1. *The Gnostic Religion* by Hans Jonas, published by Beacon Press
2. *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels, published by Random House
3. *The Nag Hammadi Gnostic Texts and the Bible* by Andrew Helmbold
4. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, pp. 1033-1040

IV. The Heresy Today

A. The spirit of this heresy is present with us today when people try to combine Christian truth with other systems of thought.

B. The spirit of this heresy is present with us today when people emphasize "correct" doctrine to the exclusion of personal relationship and lifestyle faith.

C. The spirit of this heresy is present with us today when people turn Christianity into an exclusive intellectual eliteness.

D. The spirit of this heresy is present with us today when religious people turn to asceticism or antinomianism as the best way to find favor with God.

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